WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT SUSTAINING OUR COMMON FUTURE

The World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Norway's female Prime Minister, published its report, Our Common Future, *in 1988. It is a seminal book, not only in that it stresses the interlinking nature of environment and development, but also in that it recognizes that women are actors in both, and thus are the key in sustaining our common future.*

"Women are the world's farmers: they grow the crops, tend the animals, bring in the water. [Yet] international agencies and Governments have everywhere ignored the vital part women play in caring for the environment. Their voice, like their knowledge and experience, is simply not heard."

These words of Victoria Chitepo, then Zimbabwe's Minister of Natural Resources, underline the deep link between women and the environment. She was addressing the first African Women's Assembly on Women and Sustainable Development, held in February 1989 in Harare, Zimbabwe.

In industrialized countries, women have greatly contributed to making the environment a central issue. Since the 1970s, women's groups and organizations have been very active in promoting environmental awareness, education and protection. Women make up a large part of Europe's Green parties, both as members and as party leaders.

All over the world, women play a crucial role in environmental management. As farmers, stock breeders and suppliers of fuel and water, they interact most closely with the environment. They are the managers—and often the preservers—of natural resources.

Women affect the environment as farmers. They constitute a large share—if not the majority—of farmers in the developing world. Worldwide, women produce more than 50 per cent of food and in Africa they account for 80 per cent, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

In many developing countries, men migrate to the cities in search of jobs, leaving women in charge of the farms. As many as one third of rural households are headed by women, according to an FAO study. Thus, women are making decisions —on production, land use, fertilizers and pesticides— that affect the environment in many ways.

Women are equally important in water management. As farmers, they are primary users of water in agriculture. In rural areas, women are also the main collectors and users of water for their households. They are immediately affected by degraded water systems, and have a vital interest in water quality. Their role in watershed protection and in water quality is the key to water ecological systems, a United Nations study says.

The same is true in the management of trees and forests. In many societies, women are responsible for the care and maintenance of trees. They are also the main gatherers of fuelwood for heating and cooking. For women, forests are an important resource in many ways. They provide fodder, medicinal plants, wild fruits, and materials for mats, baskets, ropes and fences. As major users of forests, women are well aware of their value, and of the need to limit exploitation to allow forest regeneration.

Women have another strong link with the environment. In various developing regions, population pressure contributes to environmental degradation, putting heavy strains on natural resources and often depleting them faster than they can be regenerated. The population factor puts a similar burden on women. High fertility rates often mean high child mortality, poor health, malnutrition and heavy domestic chores. Here women's role is again paramount. Improvements in their status are crucial in bringing down family size. Data from all over the world show that as female education, health, employment and legal rights improve, birth rates decline. Any programme bettering the situation of women will lead to lower birth rates and less pressure on the environment.

UNITED NATIONS

WOMEN AS MANAGERS OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Their close link with the environment helps explain the high number of environmental projects started by women. Women are keenly aware of environmental degradation and the need for conservation.

In many rural areas, women have taken the initiative in ensuring an adequate supply of water. As long ago as 1977, Kenyan women started a "water for health" programme which has supported over 80 community water projects. In Malawi, women help ensure the maintenance of some 8,000 handpumps all over the country.

Women are also taking care of reforestation. In Zimbabwe, the Association of Women's Clubs is carrying out several tree-planting projects, using drought-resistant trees. Kenya's Green Belt Movement—a project of Kenya's Council of Women—is a tree-planting movement rooted in the local communities, where women and young people set up nurseries and supervise the planting and care of seedlings.

India's Chipko movement is a prime example of women acting to prevent destruction of their resources. In 1973, angered by the selling of their trees to a timber company, women of Uttar Pradesh State protected them through nonviolent action: as the company prepared to cut trees near their villages, the women rushed to the woods and hugged the trees, protecting them with their bodies. Chipko has since become a major environmental force. Today Chipko's women plant trees, build soil retainer walls and draw up village forest plans.

Similar movements are active in Brazil, Nepal, the Philippines and many other countries. Women's action is not confined to reforestation: it extends to promoting community agriculture and encouraging the efficient use of fuelwood.

But too often environmental projects tend to overlook women. "Today top-down approaches often negate local women's knowledge and capabilities", says Shimwaayi Muntemba, Executive Director of the Nairobi-based Environment Liaison Centre International. Yet the solution to environmental problems may lie in empowering women, she says.

Governments and development agencies are increasingly aware that women must be involved in planning and carrying out environmental projects. The successful projects have women at their centre, stresses the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). FAO points out that women's central role in managing natural resources must be recognized by policy makers if policies are to achieve environmentally sound development.

Various United Nations agencies are supporting environmental projects carried out by women. Among them are the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA).

WOMEN: MORE VULNERABLE TO CONTAMINANTS . . .

Women are more vulnerable than men to environmental contaminants because of their childbearing role. Many reports have linked reproductive defects to contaminants such as lead, says a United Nations study. With the increase in the number of chemicals—some 70,000 chemical products are today on the market, and some 1,000 new ones enter the market each year—the impact on women and children appears to be on the increase as well. The possible effects of exposure to chemicals range from infertility, miscarriage, neonatal death and malformation, to growth retardation.

Birth defects now cause between 15 and 35 per cent of infant deaths in industrialized countries. One fourth of the abnormalities are genetic in origin, and between 5 and 10 per cent are the product of agents known to cause birth defects, such as drugs, viruses, radiation and chemicals.

Contaminants even appear in human milk. Chemicals known to be concentrated in human milk include pesticides and organohalides. Studies have shown that in some countries the daily

intake of such substances by breast-fed infants is higher than the levels considered acceptable by the World Health Organization.

. . . AND MORE ACTIVE IN PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

All over the world, women's organizations are promoting environmental awareness, education and management. Women form a large part of the membership of environmental movements. In many countries they were the first to lead the protest against chemical, water and air pollution.

Hundreds of women's groups are active in environmental issues the world over. In the Soviet Union, thousands of women are involved in a world-wide movement called Bambi, a children's ecological and ethical movement which is working to increase youth awareness of environmental issues. In the United States, the League of Women Voters has been a pioneer in forcing national action against water pollution. In Germany, women leaders have played a key role in the emergence of the Green Party.

Internationally, women have set up WorldWIDE (World Women Dedicated to the Environment), an organization promoting women's involvement in environmental management. Based in Washington, D.C., with members in some 50 countries, WorldWIDE works to make political leaders and the public more aware of environmental issues, to enhance women's influence in environmental organizations, and to increase the inclusion of women in development policies.

In 1985, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) established the Senior Women's Advisory Group on Sustainable Development, made up of women in leadership positions from 19 nations. Members include Victoria Chitepo, now Zimbabwe's Minister of Information, former French Health Minister Simone Veil, United States Congresswoman Claudine Schneider, Hungarian columnist Eva Szilagyi, and Egyptian Senator Shafika Nasser. The Group has been increasingly involved in international action.

The Advisory Group organized the African Women's Assembly on Women and Sustainable Development, held in Harare in 1989. The Assembly, attended by 160 women from 20 African countries, made recommendations on managing seas, rivers and lake basins, forests and woodlands, deserts and arid lands.

Another assembly, the Women and Environment Roundtable, was held in Tunis in February 1990 for the Arab region. Similar assemblies have been held in Bangkok for the Asian region and in Quito for Latin America and the Caribbean.

These regional meetings culminate in a major Conference, the "Global Assembly for Women and the Environment—Partners in Life" (Miami, Florida, USA, 4-8 November 1991), which presents more than 200 success stories in areas such as water, energy, waste management and environmentally friendly technologies.

Other similar activities include the symposium "Women and Children First", (Geneva, Switzerland, May 1991), organized by three United Nations bodies, and the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet (Miami, 8-12 November 1991), organized by the International Policy Action Committee, a non-UN group made up of 50 prominent women from all regions of the world.

These initiatives are geared toward the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which will convene in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 1 to 12 June 1992. The Conference is expected to draw Heads of State and Government from virtually all of the world's countries, making it the largest summit ever held—an Earth Summit.

A major achievement for women and environmental activists was the decision by the Preparatory Committee of the Conference in August 1991 to consider women's contributions to sustainable development as one of the central issues of the Conference. Thus, the Earth Summit will provide a major opportunity to support women's vital role in sustaining our common future.

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